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Title: Review of *America: The Troubled Continent of Thought* by Avital Ronell

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Abstract: Review of *America: The Troubled Continent of Thought* by Avital Ronell (Polity, 2024). 154 pp. Softbound. ISBN: 978-1-509-56027-1.

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Avital Ronell's book *America* is the necessary sequel to her previous book *Stupidity*. In this intellectually driven critique Ronell elucidates how America has become a breeding ground for ignorance, banality, stupidity, aggressiveness (passive or active). In other words, America has fallen prey to Arendt's "stupidity of evil" – if we are to reinterpret it in a Nietzschean way. Ronell considers stupidity to be the result of the sociopolitical context and it always operates, at the very least, at the community level.

MAGA (Make America Great Again) is the troubled ideology and the political slogan of the Republicans which has become the basic guideline for a return to European racism, nationalism, injustice as voiced by a clown with the "[…] Germanic name 'Trumpf'." (p. 6)

Ronell emphasizes the "pride of stupidity" which has opened a Pandora's box of anti-intellectualism that has resurrected the strict rules of Christian dogma. This "pride of stupidity," in turn, makes the Nietzschean overcoming of a simple dualist approach to identity seem like something out of the 22nd century. Ronell's witty language, which skilfully avoids boring philosophical persuasions, turns this short book into a big open protest in the name of the future of philosophical and critical thought.

The *mise en scène* of her well-proven and refined knowledge is fascinating; it is an intriguing mixture of the philosophical heritage of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Dostoevsky, Benjamin, Celan and other famous or unknown poets, writers and philosophers, with additional ingredients from pop culture. (She even includes an explanation of what happened to Derrida when he was arrested at the airport in Prague for allegedly possessing drugs, details of which I have been trying to find for a long time.) This is not only the philosophical courage of Avital Ronell, this is the poetic courage – "Dichtermut" – without which philosophy would remain unspoken, restrained, and easily forgettable. The rhetoric of Avital Ronell warms, if not to say ignites, our hearts and thoughts and remains for a long time in our conscious/unconscious zones, in our bodies, in our auras. The emphasis is not on the use of language – which unfortunately has become Anglo-Saxon academia's *raison d'être* in the name of elitism, social climbing, and racism – but on the resuscitation of dead words which dance with her thoughts. She bravely writes the hard truth of the American tragedy with the will of a philosopher-poet.

The American home of thought is steeped in nationalism, hyperactivity and overvaluation; it has no shame in just becoming a shopping mall. "The fine-grained practice of thought has been compromised not only by public or medial downgrades but also by the comorbidities that account for failures in the philosophical household, no matter how strictly supervised." (p. 9) But some hope still remains because "philosophy is never where you expect to find it," (p. 11) in the words of Nancy. It is our existential need, as suggested by Husserl. "Making sense of America requires another relation to sense, a different approach to meaning and its appointed objects." (p. 13) Even the destruction of meaning can be

a possibility for engagement with, or the creation of, a new meaning.

What is called Thinking? Nietzsche asks. Ronell continues asking that same question in the context of troubled thought in a troubled America. The New World at war with the Old one, "the constant rebranding of the gods" (p. 32), brilliantly explained by "[…] wars that come up in different genres of American representation, releasing signs of inscription and fascination in so many reunions of cartoonish Übermenschen that have migrated to American scenes of writing and projection." (p. 32) A poverty of perspective constructed itself into "failed philosophical conquest." (p. 60) MAGA is the arrogance of a limited mind driven by nationalism "along neurotically secured borders." (p. 22) And what exactly is such a mind afraid of? Derrida would likely assign this question in the domain of biology. Just like living organisms produce antibodies against foreign antigens in the process of auto-immunization it is, unfortunately, also capable of weaponizing its self-protection to destroy itself. Doesn't all this remind us of Germanity, as Ronell points out, a self-centered national philosophism that should be protected from external influences, from "fake Germans who do not speak true German and whom we should eliminate as soon as possible" (Jacques Derrida, *Geschlecht III: Sexe, race, nation, humanité*, p. 23 as cited on p. 125) This *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life), employed by the Nazis, excludes all external elements which cannot be absorbed into their own national culture.

Exactly this kind of lobotomy is established today by MAGA. America is the *Heimat* (homeland) of white, pure, Christian men driven by a thirst for *Lebensraum* with a will, stronger even than *death drive* (Lacan), to die for their country. This sick nationalism characterizes how such a society thinks, is filled with hatred of the Other, a society where money has replaced God and business has become a spiritual, fascinating experience – *mysterium fascinanas*.

Is America really the troubled continent of thought, as in Ronell's words, or is it a continent without thought, an empty shell, a mechanical device that meanders within shameless white Christian ethnocentrism, without thinking, following the traditions of their fathers and mothers born from a colonial past and holy duty to save the savages by teaching them the correct *Lebensphilosophie*. Ronell names the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and similar groups engaging in campaigns of traumatic repetition as "members of born-again fascism." (p.136) Freud's *Aggressionstrieb* is the word the author suggests to describe the state of violence driven by technopathology and the awakening of the spirit of the old authoritarian, tyrannical political leaders. This book is a gift and an inspiration to all of us – guidance on how to think in *dark times*. With great courage, she raised these questions of America's troubled times and managed to summarize many thoughts of those who previously dealt with or tried to grasp what it means to live in anti-intellectual societies where the philosophy of thought is displaced by a banal everyday life, where creating and maintaining national identity is the only goal of existence. In such *darkest times* we need to understand the *test of time*, to stop time, to establish indeterminate time, an *Augenblick*, an elsewhere, to separate history from historical time – *Historie* from *Geschichte*.

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